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FOREST SERVICE EXPECTATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL QUALITY

by R. Max Peterson, Chief, Forest Service

Have you ever asked yourself what gives you the privilege of calling yourself a professional? It's easy to say that someone is a professional, but devising criteria for defining whether or not you're a professional can be a difficult task. Is it your GS grade level? The size of the project you're working on? Or maybe it's because you've met the requirements for membership in a professional organization such as OPEDA.

At a minimum, I would include at least the following attributes in the characteristics of a professional:

1. Is well-trained in the chosen field
2. Keeps up-to-date in the profession
3. Has a concept of public service that goes beyond doing just what is expected
4. Subscribes to and practices high standards of ethics and integrity
5. Faithfully serves the client--in the case of Federal employees, the client is ultimately the public
6. Is willing to work cooperatively with other professionals and other agencies, as well as state and private groups, to accomplish a task.

One of the best ways for us to demonstrate whether or not we're professionals is by looking at how well we supply the needs of our clients--the American taxpayer. Do we have the taxpayer's best interests at heart when we agree to do a job? Do we use up-to-date techniques and knowledge? Do we provide prompt and courteous service? It is the answers to these questions that ultimately determine whether or not we're professionals.

These are also the basic questions we in the Forest Service ask when we hire a professional to work for us. Obviously, we want someone

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SURVEY RESULTS

The results of the much-talked-about OPEDA Membership Survey are ready. The response to the November 1984 survey was so overwhelming that it took your headquarters staff and volunteers until March to compile the answers. The results represent the opinions of over 2,700 members, or 30 percent of OPEDA's membership.

There were 50 questions on compensation, benefits, and retirement in the questionnaire which are considered in this article.

Questions 1-7: Which of the benefits were most important to you in reaching a decision to continue to work for the Federal government? Of the seven benefits listed 97 percent gave retirement benefits as a major reason; 85 percent, pay; 78 percent, health insurance; 68 percent, annual and sick leave; 52 percent, life insurance; and 39 percent, holidays.

Analysis: No surprises in this one. Retirement, pay, and health insurance continue to be recognized as major importance by members.

Questions 8-13: If given a choice, what parts of the retirement system should be left unchanged? Of the six questions, 88 percent agreed that cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs) should be kept, followed by: survivor benefits, 88 percent; disability protection, 82 percent; annuity payment levels, 81 percent; high three-year computation, 80 percent; and age 55 retirement, 71 percent.

Analysis: The surprise was the last-place ranking of the age 55, as well as the first-place ranking for COLAs. Other parts of the survey indicate the retire-

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THE STATE OF PROFESSIONALISM IN USDA

Part II. Trends, Management, Reforms

by George B. Rogers

In the last century, critical battles were fought to create a Civil Service system heavily insulated from patronage appointments. This enabled us to compare ourselves with ancient systems (Chinese) or more contemporary ones (British). But opponents of (or well-meaning tinkers with) our Civil Service system have continued to fight, and have won many battles which chipped away at Civil Service as it was supposed to be.

Large and growing numbers of non-classified appointees have played an increasing role in policy, administrative, and supervisory activities. Socially-oriented or politically-motivated reforms further opened the roles and introduced new evaluative criteria for agencies and individuals. 1/

That there has been a decline in the work ethic in society cannot help but be noticed in government as well. This shows up periodically in quantity and quality of output and in attitudes. One might observe some shift from: "I'm glad to have this job and will work hard" to "You're lucky I decided to come," or "I have a right to this (or a better) job." All the introduced distractions of demonstrating, meeting, organizing, and seeking social solutions cannot help but reduce professional time for thought and concentration on job assignments.

Any system like Civil Service, which is substantially closed, can produce enough problems itself to make it an attractive target for reformers. Let us note two examples of reform which have adversely affected professionalism. Started under the last Administration, but continued under the current Administration, is a new performance evaluation system. The results have been predominantly negative: a substantially increased evaluative workload; shifting of decision-making upward and away from informed super-

visors; virtual loss of peer appraisal; more enforced conformity; more political influence; over-sensitivity to top-level management whims.

Tightened or cut budgets, launched in recent years to hold down Government spending, produced further undesirable side effects. 2/ Some of these were: more difficulty in obtaining professional and service replacements; lessened opportunity to train new employees under knowledgeable and experienced professionals; excessive expansion of the user-fee approach. The consequences for the public: new costs; restricted, narrowed output; elimination of past services and resources. One can well ask: "What does the public get for its money?" and "Are they better off now?" All this does not make USDA professionals look very good, even if victims of circumstances.

We must face up to the fact that Civil Service can harbor malingerers or below-average performers. While the number is less than political rhetoric would lead the public to believe, dealing with this problem is ongoing if less effective than needed. Too often in the past, supervisors looked the other way or found themselves on the defensive as their superiors sold them out to avoid adverse publicity. Neither have "purges," reorganizations, or reclassifications been very successful. New performance evaluation systems or the withholding of ingrades did not correct the problem, especially when too many subjective criteria were introduced.

Some of the internal problems of Civil Service stem from diseconomies of scale in Government. Competitive written exams were formerly a more characteristic way to gain entry than is true today. Unassembled exams may be a way to handle larger numbers, along with the assumption of higher average educational levels.

1/ The term "bureaucrat" is not flattering to professionals. But it is rather generally used by politicians and other non-well wishers. I have known some people who probably deserved to be called "bureaucrats." But they came from both the appointed and career groups.

2/ Budget restraints are almost never objective or equalized, whether of the "meataxe" variety, or slanted to favor foreign or military spending at the expense of domestic. Basic research--even if articulated as desirable to advance technology--often gets cut the most or deferred.

But these also may make it easier to gain entry. From the standpoint of professionals, merging of P- and C.A.F. categories some years back set certain forces in motion; some devaluation of technical professional status; a levelling-out of the salary structure; more non-technical control over technical professional activities; some scaling down in the mission of providing facilitating services in seeking power and control. These have probably damaged innovation and the valuing of individual talents.

Expanding size has also resulted in a split in professional ranks between professional managers and professional practitioners. The latter ladder is now not only more of a dead end, but technicians no longer have the vast pool of skills and knowledge at higher levels upon which to draw for advice and help. One can well ask: "Where are the technical greats USDA once had in abundance?" Significantly, many of these people once went on to play administrative roles. The danger in specialization in administration and practice today is not where administrative professionals use technical practitioners wisely, but where they assume they are also top technicians and override advice on what to do, how to do it, where, and how much.

Broadened and generalized classification procedures in growing use often result in too many attempts to "fit square pegs into round holes." When the attempt fails, an individual can frequently be labeled inflexible, unmanageable, low-performing, unskilled, non-cooperative. Quite a few professionals have suffered because they were not stamped from a mold or cloned from a role model. Management has often failed to capitalize on an individual's strong points. 3/

The decline in agriculture as a field of employment in the general economy has had its influence on USDA professionalism and its breadth of influence. Too many times, issues affecting agriculture are decided before they reach the agency, or overbalances

from consumerism or environmentalism can dominate within. Until recently, diplomatic politeness overrode advice about restrictive or unfair trade practices by foreign countries. And, advice on farm foreclosure impacts, early disease or pest monitoring, etc., may go unheeded for too long.

Maximum achievement for professionals results when there is mutual respect and cooperation between various professional disciplines. And, it is necessary for professionals to grow and learn, not only from each other, but by acquiring new skills as technology and machines offer opportunities. Older employees may have as many "blind spots" about this as newer employees may have about the value of experience and specialized knowledge.

Our universities now turn out vast numbers of professionals. It is alleged they are better and more broadly trained in techniques and new skills. But too often the product is quite "generalist" in nature and somewhat imbued with newer and "more glamorous" fields of work. Working substance like commodity of functional knowledge is too often neglected. This is unfortunate for the users of much output. Additionally, it poses internal problems of how to balance new skills and specific knowledge, or to fill some essential jobs in "non-glamorous" categories.

OPEDA could spearhead progress, if it could objectively confront problems which arise from internal causes or special interest group objectives. This may be difficult if OPEDA membership contains people offended by some critical consensus positions. Such a state of affairs would reduce OPEDA's official help on internal issues. The ability to more readily reach consensus positions on external matters would place such an organization in a position others may view as a largely adversary role. An internal dichotomy arises with inability to be very effective on such issues as: poor management, favoritism, bias, purges, upper-dominated performance ratings and rewards, inadequate facilitating services, etc. Beyond the day-to-day dealings of OPEDA with the Administration, Congress, and other organizations lies an opportunity for "truth squads" (retirees and those not now in Government) to confront accusers and try to rebuild a sagging public image.

3/ This is amazing in a society that stresses individual rights, "being your own person," or "doing your own thing." As people and their aptitudes and skills vary, diverse kinds of jobs and assignments could more often be found to use them more effectively.

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who can meet our needs as expressed in a job description and we want someone who can do the work at an assigned grade level. But more importantly, we also want professionals who can demonstrate that they are current in their field and have the capability of meeting the needs of the public.

Because of our mandate to manage a wide number of natural resources, the Forest Service encourages its professionals to not only stay current in their disciplines, but to also have at least an understanding of basic resource management principles as well as related subjects such as economics and business administration. Some of this supplemental knowledge can be obtained simply by keeping abreast of current events by reading professional journals and current publications, attending professional meetings, or by completing short courses. While this may seem obvious, I'm always surprised at the number of professionals I encounter who seem to have little or no knowledge about what goes on outside of their own specialty. The total commitment to a narrow field of interest may be valued in some agencies or industries, but the Forest Service believes a commitment to a profession must be tempered with an understanding and appreciation of other disciplines as well.

Training is another area in which the Forest Service feels the individual must carry the major load. We have a very active technical and managerial training program which includes individual development plans addressing present and future job skills and needs. It is the individual's responsibility, however, to show the initiative needed to take proper advantage of these programs. This can become particularly difficult when the demands of the present job leave little opportunity or time for training for future positions. In these situations, programs centering on apprenticeships or other types of on-the-job training can be particularly helpful in broadening the individual's professional background and skills.

In addressing the qualities the Forest Service looks for in professionals, I feel I would be remiss in not mentioning one particularly important element of professionalism--cost. There is some tendency to think that a "professional solution" should be sophisticated, complex and costly. Someone once said the essence of good management is to do for fifty cents what most people can do for a dollar. I couldn't agree more with this statement and, based on my long experience with the Forest Service, it is apparent to me that the agency shares this philosophy. Solutions to Forest Service and USDA problems must be reliable, efficient, economical, and environmentally sound so that we, as well as the public, can benefit from them over long periods of time. Due to current economic realities, the Forest Service will obviously be seeking professionals who can solve problems effectively and with a minimum expenditure of funds.

One other professional attribute we seek in potential employees is an ability to be good team players. I know that many people think the kind of teamwork that athletic teams strive for can't possibly have any application in agency situations. But as far as the Forest Service is concerned, teamwork is an essential ingredient in everything we do whether in the field or office.

Most professionals pass through several distinct stages in their careers. They start as trainees, move to the journeyman level, and eventually the specialist or managerial level. We have found that the most important attribute, perhaps even more important than professional skill, in making a smooth transition from one level to the next is the ability to work well with others to solve problems as a team.

During the past fifteen years, the Forest Service has placed more and more emphasis on the interdisciplinary approach to resource management. In fact, this teamwork approach has become the rule rather than the exception. There are a number of reasons for this, but undoubtedly the major one is that we have found that effective planning for our multiple-use approach to resource management depends on integrating the skills and experience of a wide variety of professionals into one overall effort. This requires teamwork.

Unfortunately, the ability to work smoothly with professionals from many different disciplines is not something that is taught in college. Forest Service professionals now learn to work together through experience in trying to reach a common goal of providing the

optimum management for the nation's natural resources. As a result, people who already possess the ability to be team players often find themselves in the thick of Forest Service resource management activities much more quickly than those who prefer to work alone and unable to coordinate work with others. No matter how they learn the skill, professionals should add it to their tool kit, recognizing both its strengths and hazards.

Although this interdisciplinary approach to problem solving frequently results in new and creative solutions, it can also have its drawbacks. It has been said that a camel is a horse designed by a committee. Well, without proper direction, an interdisciplinary team can easily come up with a camel when it was trying to design a horse.

Based on my experience, it appears to me that interdisciplinary efforts will most likely fail if they are devoted to coming up with just one list of definite actions to be taken in solving a problem. Undoubtedly, the best use of these teams is to have them develop various alternatives, do a complete analysis of each, and then present these alternatives to the decisionmaker for action.

My crystal ball has been known to get somewhat fogged at times, but the gift of prophecy isn't required to see some of the basic concepts the future holds for us.

Just looking at the United States for the next ten years, it's evident that there will be greater emphasis placed on increasing the productivity of individuals, organizations, and basic industries while protecting important environmental values. What I believe the American people are saying is that they want the fruits of new technology and scientific research, but not if the price is more toxic waste dumps and a degraded environment. In short, America is looking for both a healthy economy and a healthy environment.

This desire for the best of both worlds can be met, I believe, by finding better ways to bring the expertise of various professions together and concentrating them on a common goal. Whether you call it interdisciplinary planning or teamwork, the fact is this approach to management is working and is a reality. Needless to say, it is extremely important for professionals to acquire the skills needed to apply this type of management approach.

In conclusion, I would like to summarize my thoughts on how the Forest Service defines a quality professional. First, we look for someone who has enough professional pride to keep abreast of all the latest developments affecting his or her chosen field of endeavor. Secondly, we want professionals who aren't reluctant to take responsibility for enhancing their skills through additional training or by working with or on other staffs. Third, we want professionals who are dedicated to the conservation and wise use of resources for this and future generations. Fourth, we want someone who can look at problems and come up with solutions that are simple, cost-effective, and compatible with the current economic situation. Last, and perhaps most important, we want professionals who are team players.

The increasing complexities of our modern world make it essential that professionals from various disciplines work together to find common solutions to some very difficult problems. Professionals who cannot adapt to this reality and who continue to focus their efforts on narrowly defined goals instead of working cooperatively with others to make the world a little better place for all of us will be of limited use to the Forest Service, USDA, or any other employer.

Based on my long association with OPEDA, I feel confident the vast majority of the professionals in this Organization can meet or exceed the Forest Service's expectations for quality. It's because of this belief in their talents and sense of dedication that I see the future as a period of challenge and opportunity, instead of a depressing time filled with insurmountable problems.

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ment age of 55 is of greater importance than indicated in this section. This section does direct OPEDA to continue to work toward maintaining survivor benefits, disability protection, and COLAs.

Questions 14-19: If, as some spokesmen say, the present retirement is too costly, what adjustment might be made to lower costs? First off, 79 percent agreed that we should maintain the present system. However, in the battle to save the present system, 44 percent thought an increase in retirement contribution without other changes would be acceptable, 36 percent disagreed; 37 percent accepted higher retirement contributions if annuities were not changed, 41 percent disagreed; 25 percent thought we should maintain the same contribution level but change to high-5, 51 percent disagreed; 24 percent would keep the same contribution but raise the retirement age, 62 percent disagreed; and 5 percent thought we should keep the same contribution but increase the age, 86 percent disagreed.

Analysis: Basically, the membership is satisfied with the present system, but if adjustments were to be made the only one that should be considered is an increase in contribution and that with great reluctance.

Questions 20-25: What changes would you build into a new Federal retirement system? 80 percent agreed that a 401K type tax shelter/savings program would be most desirable with only 5 percent disagreeing. 76 percent thought we should include an investment program to assure a higher yield for retirement trust funds, 6 percent disagreed; 74 percent would include a thrift plan with an employer matching the employee's contribution, 9 percent disagreed; 72 percent would include a provision to give employees an opportunity to increase the annuities by making an extra contribution to the trust fund, 10 percent disagreed; and, lastly, 61 percent thought we would have a more portable system so an employee could take his/her retirement funds upon leaving government service, 13 percent disagreed.

Analysis: In designing a new Federal retirement system some type of tax shelter savings plan with the employer providing an incentive to save by matching some percentage of the employee's salary was highly favored. Investment of trust funds into a higher yielding portfolio continues to be an employee goal.

Questions 26-32: What changes would you consider in health insurance for Federal employees? One of the key questions was, "Would you favor OPM's voucher approach to reduce the cost of health insurance?" In answer, 12 percent agreed to this system, 59 percent disagreed, and 29 percent were undecided. Of the other questions, 80 percent would emphasize catastrophic illness protection, 6 percent disagreed; 70 percent agreed that plans should include better dental coverage, 16 percent disagreed; 66 percent favored including hospice and home care, 9 percent disagreed; 61 percent wanted more comprehensive coverage, 17 percent disagreed; 55 percent would favor a lower deductible while 24 percent disagreed; and 53 percent favored any reasonable changes that would allow lower premiums, 22 percent disagreed.

Analysis: Present costs of Federal employee's health insurance appears to be accepted but don't decrease the benefits. The most decided tilt was toward catastrophic illness protection and perhaps a plan should be available emphasizing that type of protection. The OPM voucher plan was not rejected since over 40 percent were either undecided or thought it would be worthwhile.

Questions 33-42: On the horizon are discussions that focus on reducing leave and holiday benefits. What would you select as some options? 62 percent agreed to exchanging sick and/or annual leave to obtain a higher retirement annuity, 25 percent disagreed; 66 percent were unwilling to consider exchanges of sick for annual or annual for sick leave. 49 percent would be unwilling to exchange leave (sick or annual) for higher pay, 33 percent were willing; and 44 percent did not agree to exchange leave (annual or sick) for any other benefits, 35 percent agreed. Of the holidays, 62 percent agreed to exchange holidays for days of their selection--personal holidays, 27 percent disagreed; 59 percent would be willing to exchange one or more holidays for other benefits, 27 percent disagreed.

Analysis: Leave and holiday adjustments attracted little special attention by members indicating most are satisfied with the present system. It was surprising that 25 percent would not agree to exchange sick or annual leave for a higher retirement annuity. Perhaps this is one of the questions not clearly understood since most members oppose proposals to eliminate sick leave as a retirement credit.

Questions 43-46: These questions were directed toward the acceptability and use of the Performance Appraisal system. 78 percent agreed Standards of Performance were needed by both management and the employee, 13 percent disagreed; 71 percent agreed that job elements and standards were tailored to the job, 19 percent disagreed; 64 percent agreed that their last appraisal did accurately reflect the work and quality of work performed, 26 percent disagreed; and 44 percent agreed the appraisal system was not implemented in a way that was likely to be objective and fair, 36 percent disagreed.

Analysis: The acceptance of the appraisal system was fairly high and in general a majority also thought the system could be implemented in an unfair manner. There is indicated a need for continuing training of managers and more research on the methods of developing job elements and standards for Federal employees.

Questions 47-50: Should the Hatch Act remain as is or should adjustments be made? 77 percent agreed the Hatch Act should be maintained as is with 13 percent disagreeing. 6 percent agreed to cancelling the Act, 82 percent disagreed. 17 percent agreed to liberalizing the Act to permit off-the-job partisan political activity at the local level with 70 percent disagreeing. 70 percent agreed that the Hatch Act should be strengthened to assure compliance by political appointees covered by the Act, 11 percent disagreed.

Analysis: OPEDA members continue to strongly support the Hatch Act. Changes in the Act that strengthen coverage to political appointees serving within agencies of the Department should be supported.

Conclusion: OPEDA's headquarters staff, the National Board and Council are and will be using the results to develop policies to guide OPEDA through the legislative sessions ahead. The survey was very timely in terms of the issues the Administration and Congress have and are considering during the 99th Congress.

This OPEDA Survey has been computerized and tabulated through the extraordinary efforts put forth by OPEDA member Tom Dempster.

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THE ECONOMICS OF OPEDA

Under the direction of Economic Vice President Howard Williams, OPEDA has provided members with information about their benefits and how the benefits can best be used for the members' economic gain. At the 1984 Council Meeting, we heard of the trends toward a cafeteria approach for benefits. This trend is as apparent in the Federal government as in the private sector. The question raised is, "What does this mean to OPEDA members?"

It is likely that by the turn of the century each Federal employee will be able to design a benefit package that fits his/her situation. In government, the choices provided in health and life insurance are indicative of this trend.

The individual employee will be assuming more responsibilities and with that more risk. OPEDA's goal is to try to provide information to members to help them select what is best for them.

The form on the next page titled, "OPEDA Asks," is the spin-off of an effort by the Interagency Chapter of Washington, D. C. It is designed to help employees in USDA better understand the Federal Employees Group Life Insurance (FEGLI) program, and how to estimate an employee's insurance needs. Once you estimate your insurance needs, you then can decide how FEGLI can be used as a part of your insurance program. The Open Season for FEGLI ends June 30th, so it might be well to act quickly.

OPEDA ASKS: ARE YOU COVERED?

Use this handy worksheet to check your insurance needs during FEGLI (Federal Employees Group Life Insurance) Open Season June 1-30. Workshops are scheduled for different age groups:

Time: 12-12:45 P.M.
 June 18 20 to 35 years Room 5066-S
 June 21 35 to 45 years Room 3501-S
 June 25 Over 45 years Room 3501-S

Estimated Life Insurance Needs

Example: Spouse, 35
 2 Children
 Your Family

1. Funeral, estate taxes, etc.	\$ 5,000	_____
2. Settle non mortgage debt	4,200	_____
3. Emergency fund	8,000	_____
4. College fund	60,000	_____
5. Expected living expenses:		
a. Average annual living expenses	33,000	_____
b. Spouse's average annual income	18,000	_____
c. Annual Civil Service benefits (See chart below)	6,000	_____
d. Net annual living expenses (a-b-c)	9,000	_____
e. Years until spouse is 90	55	_____
f. Investment rate factor	22	_____
g. Total living expenses (d x f)	198,000	_____
6. Total monetary needs (1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5g)	275,200	_____
7. Total investment assets and life insurance in hand	82,000	_____
8. Additional life insurance need (6-7)	193,200	_____

Now that you've figured your insurance needs, use the Life Insurance Worksheet provided by your agency personnel office.

Your Total

Guide for Entries

Line

1. Last expenses: \$2,500-\$10,000
2. Credit cards, notes payable, etc.
3. Two to four months pay
4. College education: \$6,000/yr. for State Schools . . . \$12,000/yr. + for Private. Allow additional for inflation (double if 9 yrs. before college start)
- 5a. Living expenses: 80% of current expenditures
- 5f. Investment Rate Factors

5e No.	Conser- vative	More aggressive
25	20	16
30	22	17
35	25	19
40	27	20
45	30	21
50	31	21
55	33	22
60	35	23

5c. MONTHLY CIVIL SERVICE SURVIVOR BENEFITS As of 1 January 1985

Length of Employment 18 Months to 22 Years	20,000	25,000	HIGH 3-YEAR AVERAGE SALARY				
			30,000	35,000	40,000	50,000	60,000
Spouse (only)	366	458	550	641	733	916	1,106
Spouse & 1 child	600	692	784	875	967	1,150	1,340
Spouse & 2 children	834	926	1,018	1,109	1,201	1,384	1,574
Spouse & 3 or more children	1,068	1,160	1,252	1,343	1,435	1,618	1,808

Multiply by 12 for Annual Benefit but divide by 2/3 if spouse is working for Government.

Federal Employees Almanac—1985 Edition